

REMAIN
POETRY BY JONNY BOLDUC

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Teacher's Prayer

please, god. let the hot water
in the trailer turn on, suddenly,
like a river flooding a bank.
let the nirvana hoodie
that reeks of cat piss
be washed with fresh detergent.

let these kids know some kindness.
let these kids know someone holding
a laundry basket to their hips as they walk
to the washer. let these kids have coats to shield
them from the harsh wind. let these kids have pepperoni
pizza birthday parties and let these kids know the touch of someone
who loves them.

let these kids memorize the wrinkles in someone's face, really
remember how they talked,
how they shuffled a deck of cards,
what they said
when they stubbed a toe.

let these kids have
someone they remember,
someone they could write a poem about,
someone who loves them enough to
put them first.
please let the kids have someone
who doesn't give a fuck if they get
a B minus on an essay if it keeps them alive.

please let these kids have someone who doesn't
call them a "pussy," someone who lets them have green hair,
someone who keeps them like a child should be kept safely, like
a flame clutched in a palm, not a match struggling to stay lit on
a cold night.

please let these kids please let these kids please let these kids

Dead Best Friend

Dead best friend, I
know dreams are your
house parties.

I am
like a teenager stealing
mom's vodka, getting
wasted for the first time.

You walk without striding, you
leap from dream to dream
and shadow to shadow.

I follow, but I haven't quite
learned to walk without legs,
how to live in the abstraction.

"Try to keep up," you say
as you drag me into your
old kitchen.

Everything
is how I remember. Captain Crunch
on the counter.
You open the fridge
And grab a cold piece of pizza.
Your dog
leaps up on my leg and I scratch him
between the ears.

Your dog is dead too.

"Let's make a deal," you say,

turning to me. "I'll teach you
how to walk through a dream,
if you let me remember what it is
like to walk barefoot in the sand.

I will teach you how to breath
without breath if you let me take
a deep draw of air."

I'm about to answer, I'm
about to say

I will, I'd do
anything to trade places
to have you here
sipping coffee

and i wake up
to a siren wailing
outside

when i turn thirty

don't let it happen. don't become worse.

wait.

revise. edit the statement.

let it happen. become worse.

easy. i can do that.

maybe

this is razing something to build it back up. maybe

this is burning the manuscript

to write the novel.

a mantra for each day;

Monday: there is no magic and everyone must die,

Tuesday; eventually the furnace sputters and the house gets cold.

Wednesday; i can't keep waiting for the holes in the drywall to fill,

or for the mold on the baseboards to be scrubbed clean.

Thursday: i have to do it myself.

Friday: all my problems stem from the way i think;

Saturday: get a therapist.

Sunday: therapy is bullshit.

why do i think i'm different? Why do i think my

narrative arch is more gilded than

everyone else's?

what is latent, gradual, building,

like a hot wind sweeping across the grass?

what fires will catch?

what will fizzle out into ash?

why is there a

stranger in my bathroom?
why is he clutching his chest like
he's having a heart attack?

look , man, i tell myself, if you're not
going to kill yourself, you have to
do something. you can't just wait around
for another ten years. you can't just take a nap
in a car that's plunging down,
you have to break the window
and swim out.

why not, i answer? why not sleep if i am tired? why
not shatter if i am broken? why hold myself up for
another decade?

because, my friend, this is the door and
you have the key in your hands. because this is the
window and you have the brick. just because
time is a puncture wound letting your blood, just
Because your bones are glued to the floor, just because
you left your mind out in the cold and you dog chained your
soul and you are empty, you still have the key and
there is still

a way out.
so what if it's worse.

when i turn thirty
I am going
To find
A way out

Litany

the only thing god told you when you were born
was
"keep it safe"
as he passed you
a small, open flame

The Mythology of Conception

Our mother and father, in a car, screaming towards midnight.

Each moment is a trapped ecosystem, like pond water in a jar. The conversation is like bacteria eating away at the host. Father is the host and mother isn't really listening. Mother is the host and father's mouth is open, drooling.

It is time to cross county lines and he finally stops pretending. He doesn't touch the brakes.

He says, "we're both miserable. Why not pull over, illuminate a mound of dirt with the headlights, break off a rib, and bury it."

"No," mother says. "You don't know the first thing about raising a child. Do you know how to fasten a seatbelt? How to warm a bottle? How to drip the milk on your wrist to check the heat? Do you even know how to keep a child alive?"

"I can't even keep myself alive," father says.

Mother sneers.

"That's your problem. You're too sad. You live inside of your sadness, burrow a home in it. Why are you sad? A God shouldn't be sad. A God should be violent or jealous or hopeful or full of pride. You never studied the Greeks."

"I was too busy playing Xbox and smoking weed out of an apple," father says. "But if we did it and the rib really sprouted a tree and the fruit became a child, the child would be as miserable as the parent. It would not be right to bring up a child of God like that. It wouldn't be right for me to be a father. Think about where I come from."

"Where do you come from?" mother asks.

"I come from a patch of black ice and an over correction. I come from a strip mall parking lot that stretches back into the horizon like a mountain range. Sure, I don't know much about the Greeks, but I heard about Odysseus. If we turned around and we beat the jaws of midnight I would have a Lowe's parking lot for a homecoming."

"You think I want to stay in this car for eternity?" Mother says, gesturing to the interior of the Surbaru, the darkness lit up by the blue light of the dash. "Do you even think of me?"

Father drools a bit, glances lopsided at her. Not answering.

“When we were together in our bed, how could I know I’d be bound to you forever? This isn’t about me. It’s your dream. But if you tried, you could turn this car around, drive back, and go home,” she says.

Father doesn’t answer. He doesn’t even try.

“We don’t get to choose our homeland,” she spits.

“But I choose not to go back. We should keep driving. I won’t try to create a child from my flesh.”

“Our flesh,” mother says, correcting him.

He speaks as if he is the one who will bear the child, she thinks. And when he wakes up, we will crack our ribs in half like a bar of chocolate and bury a child deep in the earth.

I can’t let him wake up.

My mother and father, in a car, screaming towards midnight, blood splattered on the dashboard.

Untitled

been putting in overtime, haven't you?
looking out over bridges,
longing to throat the knife.
wishing to plunge deep down
into the depths of the river flooding the bank.
but death won't return the call.
you're frustrated, tired of
bottoming out, moving slow motion
through the bleeding vacuum of time.
listen,
give death a reason to stay home from work.
a reason to sleep through his alarm.
a reason to get stuck in traffic.
to keep his scythe sheathed.
let death rest.
purge the thoughts of leaving from your head, son.
leaving is easy.
staying is harder.

Remain

The only correction
for a 350 pound man,
alone,
in a car,
screaming
as he clutches
the steering wheel,
ready to be thrown
headlong into oblivion
like a sack of potatoes

is the hospital.

A ward.
Three days of
comatose,
no slipping, green socks.

And after?
The work.

Here is the narrative.

I am handing myself over to the ruthless nights
and the days full up with panic.
If I can ride above the current of lifting air
like a starling,
I will.

If I must feed on the dregs

like a suckerfish,
I will.

My only option is to remain.
The mantra.
REMAIN.

There is no gilded throne, no exit ticket.
There is no shortcut.

There is only tearing
into the meat of life like an animal,
crazed with wild thoughts
carried off by gusts,
spat out by the weak,
coughing ego,
hacking with sickness,
the self that is so frail
and so intent on breaking.

“Imagine,” I say to myself,
“a long gaze outwards,
at these mountains
And winds and woods.

Imagine a look out
towards the people who,
With frailness and kindness,
save others from
collapsing while they,
themselves, tremble.

Imagine something simple,
something pure.

But the most complicated trick the self can pull,
Like a tiger jumping through a burning hoop,
is to acknowledge that these two truths can exist at once.

The first: the self can be crumbling.
Maybe it should die. Not the body, not the spirit, but the self.
The thing that looks like a stranger. Maybe I should raze and
Build again.

The second: there is a world, and it is dying.
It is beautiful. It means everything.

There is a door you closed, and you can rise up from your sickbed and
Creak it open. You can cover your eyes from the harsh sunlight,
Take trembling first steps. You can rise. You can rise. You can rise.

You can remain.

Cat

A sleeping cat, twitching, her whiskers
Subtly dancing to some dream that sparks her
Senses and instincts.

At night, a small, soft paw crosses
My huge, heaping body. She takes the pilgrimage each night,
Traversing my mountainous frame rocked with the
Reverberations of snores.

At 5:30 in the morning,
I wake, on my side, to her profile, looking out the cracked
Open window, sniffing fresh air, staring
at birds, lit up golden light of the morning.

She does not know that yesterday, I was
On a high precipice, dreaming of freefalling into oblivion.
Or maybe she does, and that is why she turns her head,
Locks eyes with me, and purrs.

She says;

Yes, there is darkness. But you must
accept the darkness as a friend, as I do. You must
usher in the tired night with
open arms and use the
natural barrier of evening
as survival.

Go where where the dark is endless, full of stars,
A spattering of light in the void,
and claim some light as your own.
Claim a patch of sunlight. Remain,
My giant friend. There is so much that is delicious in the night.

So much warmth in the days. Stay a little while longer.

I think I can remain. For her.

I Don't Make Promises Anymore

the gulley on the side of the road
floods in the spring
and turns into a bog,
six feet deep in the middle
until it dries out in August.

there are tadpoles in the black stained water
and they are currency.
we put them in a 20 gallon plastic bin filled with
hose and rain water
and whichever grows
into the biggest frog wins.

we name them after pokemon
and we feed them earthworms
and we mess around with them,
make them wear hats and pretend t
hey are wizards before letting them
go in the retention pond.

usually, we stand on the rocks and try to catch them
but we can hear the frogs farther out in the little bog.

there's another rock that *maybe* we could jump to
and we could hop out into the middle of the gulley
and catch the big fat, almost frogs.

there's a barn in the cul-de-sac thats old and falling apart
and is gray and rotting,
and we're not allowed inside
but i go in all the time
because it's really neat.

there's dust and old bottles of whiskey
and metal and even old tractor pieces
and hoes and pitchforks on the wall.

I know there's an old ladder in there,
and if i stole it we could lay it across the rock
and reach the middle and
we could catch those really good tadpoles.

but we have to cross the rotting floor.
 i'm scared. the floor is bouncy and watery
 and when you put weight on it it kind of feels
 like stepping on foam.

it's about ten feet to the side of the wall where the old ladder is
 and i stand in the doorway
 and i don't want to go first.

You say *i'll go first if you promise to save me if i fall.*

i say *ok*

and you take a step onto the rotted floor and it holds and i plod along behind you.

we get to the middle.

I am a few steps behind you.

your back foot falls through the floor.
 you tumble backwards,
 and bash your head off the floor
 ragdolling backwards into the gaping hole.

i scream your name
 your body hits and sounds like a dry sapling snapping
 and you groan
 and i hear your breathing
 get heavy and heavier and
 i hear you wretch
 and i can't move i have to save you i told you i would save you but if i move towards you i could
 fall into the middle and i'm frozen

and your heavy breathing sounds more like gasping, and i am laying on my stomach a few steps
 behind where the floor swallowed you.

and the gasping stops
 oh my god the gasping
 stops the gasping stops

and it's silent.

i'm not a serial killer, i promise but

when i was a kid i crushed bugs. our lawn had a hill and on the crest where the sun hit full on the grass at the end of the summer,

the grass it would be dry and would be hopping with tiny grasshoppers and aphids.

and i would sit and pick the grass in clumps and break the twigs up and make little log cabins,
and every time i saw a little grasshopper

i'd play with it kind of like a cat does,

wait for it to hop almost out of reach and grab it gently between my fingers

but more often than not gentle wasn't gentle enough to keep their tiny bodies from popping and from keeping guts from smearing on my thumbs.

and i would imagine there were little villages and farms and
as i stepped from grass clump to grass clump
i'd imagine stomping on all the little places and

i would picture smoke rising from the homes and the farms smushed and the little people screaming, "oh no! It's the giant!"

and they would be so afraid. they would all be afraid of me.
on the bus steven punched me in the stomach
because i wouldn't let him play my gameboy and
i knew one day he would be afraid of me. in the lunch line
kevin found a rotten tomato he forgot was in his backpack and
put me in a headlock and smashed it in my face
and oh won't he be sorry when i have him in a
headlock and squeeze him a little too hard
like he's a tiny grasshopper

. one day. kevin works at walmart and steven works at a car dealership and i will take them to the high dry grass and i will dry them out and i will i will will crush like bugs and i will i will

Untitled 2

Approach
death.

Palm him a \$20,
whisper
“Me next.

Please. I’m all the way
spent. Got nothing left, spare a
finished epilogue
composed in my mind.

Please.

I want to be gone before the ink dries.

It’s not so much I want to die,
It’s that I’m not sure how to stay alive.
Not sure how to move through the days.
Not sure if I deserve to stay.”

Death says,

“Look. I got a lot of open doors to close.
I got a lot of threads to cut.
I could spend all day reaping and
I could feast every night. But I look
forward to the mornings, when the orange sun is low
and new in the sky. I enjoy losing as much as I win.
I love life as much as I love
the absence of it.

I'll come when I am called.
There is no steamwhistle ringing out for you.
Don't ring the bell yourself.
Jesus, kid.
It's not about
what you deserve.
It's not about punishment.
Jesus.

Get a better fucking therapist.”

Our Lewiston

It's not that I don't love my city.

It's not that my city doesn't want me,
It's how can I sleep? They died in my backyard.

And our Lewiston says,
"I know. I can't sleep either. They died in my cradle."

Even after the news vans leave,
the basilica spires tickle the clouds.
Even as the candles and the Jack-o-Lanterns
pile in front of where those souls lifted, I see the
twin skylines from
the top of Goff Hill.

Even when it seemed as if
terror gripped the night,
a terror still locked in on our throat,
Lewiston, you ushered in a
new morning, all pink,
orange, and purple
mirrored in the calm canal water.

Do you remember, Lewiston,
when the looms hummed and whirred?
Now, ghosts in the brick sing with
the old, forgotten hum of this

ancient engine,

saying, 'we remember the hot mill steam.'

And life, from the tilled garden of the past,
reached up from the brick, a vibrant
generation, growing, this place, not without pain.

And God, city, I love you, but
18 candles is too many.

God, I love you city, but
I can't sleep.

And neither can you, with
eighteen bricks demolished from your foundation.

We shook, that October night,
terror and sirens and earthquaking grief.

I love you, city, but I am scared.

And dear city, you reply,
"the foundation is cracked, but
the walls are strong. Give to me one light
to chase away the darkness.
Give to me thousands
of lights, pooling like stars.
We cannot unshatter the night they were stolen,
but together, we can remain tall through the storm."

A Poem About the Guitar Riff from I Can't Handle Change by Roar

Let the dream play again, if you have a moment. Even if you're busy,
take a seat. This memory is a placeholder. A homeroom, somewhere
you each spend blearyeyed high school morning; a point where two
loops converge. The spot where the CD always skips. The vacant convenience
store you passed by walking to school every morning;
tufts of weeds growing up through the crumbling concrete,
a faded pepsi sign. And sometimes, I ask myself if
this is all there is left.

And it's fucked up that these places make me sad, or at least achy,
like I took the wrong turn, a gnawing sense that
this world is not the right one, and at some point
I walked through the wrong door.

All these places, half formed, where I've
sat down, risen from, stared at.
Places that still infiltrate dreams.

Childhood bedroom,
divots in the green carpet,
a place that should have been safe
from terror

but that danger collapsed in on.

And I want to go back. I want to go
Back to my dorm room, I want to go back
to the house party where I met you, I want to
go back to Halifax and I want to go back and I want to
make these memories comforting.

I want to erase what really happened when the door
creaked open and the shadows bled in like an open wound.
Go back to the empty years and make them whole.
Go back to the forgotten days and fill them with meaning.

The days are the years and the years are the life. And
years are the stone upon the chest. The change I can't handle.

I Promise to Throat the Knife Another Day

been putting in overtime, haven't you?
looking out over bridges,
longing to throat the knife.
wishing to plunge deep down
into the depths of the river flooding the bank.
but death won't return the call.
your frustrated, tired of
bottoming out, moving slow motion
through the bleeding vacuum of time.
listen,
give death a reason to stay home from work.
a reason to sleep through his alarm.
a reason to get stuck in traffic.
to keep his scythe sheathed.
let death rest.
purge the thoughts of leaving from your head, son--
the exit bag is easy.
It's much harder
to stay.

Apology

I'm not sure if I'm allowed to tell you,

but

the door of the home we grew up in

flung open

and

the junk drawer

is stuffed full of

handwritten

apology

notes.

The hamster

we buried in the

backyard

in 2005

is scurrying across

the kitchen countertops

fresh sheets,

still hot from the

dryer

parachuted

on the bed.

Sims 2 loaded

up on the

white brick

computer

that looming dark
corner of the
basement where
I saw a ghost;
the terrible roar of
the furnace echoing in the dark.

Chalk etchings in the driveway,
portraits of our family,
as we were when we died.

Smiling, neat sweaters,
capturing the moment
we gave ourselves

to the flow of
the days
that do not
understand
mercy

or
what it
means
to cry
“uncle”.

And I have been battered by the unrelenting force of the days. The terror of the nights. I have
given up.

I have burned this house in my mind. I have razed this memory to the ground. I have tried to end
my life twice--

I don't know if I'm allowed to tell you, but

Step out
into the front yard.

The notes, floating in the air
coming down
like snow,
blotting out the sun.

I caught one.

I don't remember writing it,
But it was from me, as I am, in the
loathed present--

addressed to my
ten year old self.

I could see him
watching from the
living room window,
buck teeth beaming,
ballcap turned backwards,
holding a Gameboy SP.

The note read:

"I'm sorry for giving
up on you.
For giving
up on living."

Another floats down. Not an apology, but a response.

"It's okay.

Want to play

Animal Crossing?

That always

makes

me feel better

when I'm sad.

Or we could

look for frogs
at the grassy edge of the
retention pond.
We have time."

Waiting for a Friend

If the myths are true, I would will for you in infinity. I imagine death as if swept by a great river, souls polished clean of memory like cool, smooth onyx. I will thrash against the numbing waters of Lethe, hop on some ephemeral bank, jumping from surface to surface as rock and stone and the body of our world slides into nothingness.

I would stand, wavering, holding on against the great river and I would watch for you from the bank and I would run to you as your body crossed the boundary into death and we would fold into each other and we would wade together, hand in hand, bathed in the fog of forgetting.

Last night, a copper moon lit up the sky as I drove a winding backroad home. Last night, I chugged a seltzer water, and belched before I went to bed. A dreamless sleep. I woke up with a headache, a single thought ringing in my head like a mantra. The question that returns to the doorstep like a once lost cat covered in fleas.

What is left?

There was not much left of your body. Just ash where flesh had been. Closed casket for the entire family. No faces. No peace.

What remains? Can I find your atoms somewhere, floating through the universe? Can I speak with you in a dream, tell you how much I miss you, how sorry I am it ended with terror and a struggle and a brother killing a brother?

If you exist, somewhere, I will find a path, rambling through the cosmic lanes, over the eternal brooks gurgling with light and flame, across the trestles and the alabaster, shining underbrush. I will wander through the deep forest of stars, I will climb the dusted cliffs of galaxies, I will gaze upon horizon – the far off flickering gates of heaven will dance in the sky. From here, heaven is only a flight away, and I have built these paper wings to burn. There is no going back, once I land, smoldering –

I will feel the pain of Prometheus, the pain of a man searching among the gods. I have spent years searching for you, friend. I have spent my life foraging for the trace of your steps, tracking the small shadows of your footprints through the silent trails of eternity,

years spent stumbling through the forests of everything, lost in the dense thickets of reality, drowning in the expanding circles of comprehension, clouded by the tears of your departure and stung by the twisting pain of permanence. I will find that path, or blaze it myself. I am a mortal doing my best, meandering under the dome of gods, looking for the smile in your soul searching for the solace in your embrace. Seeking the last whisper you sang into the folds of wind.

You are not a memory, you are not a fistful of dust. And if you are, I will find you, I will scoop you up, put you in a jar, and I will take you home.